

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Latin America and Gramsci / The Young
Gramsci / Reviews*

Article 10

2020

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Recommended Citation

Pennucci, Nicolò, On Massimo Modonesi's "The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action", *International Gramsci Journal*, 4(1), 2021, 151-165.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol4/iss1/10>

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Abstract

Massimo Modonesi's *Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action* refocuses attention on the class nature of society and the constitution of the subaltern classes as a political subject, relying on central Gramscian categories. His analysis regards in particular Latin America and the conflicting analyses of social movements there: "class-based" and / or class-mediated, or "populist". In this latter approach, the author deals with the line of analysis, regarding Latin America in particular, that is chiefly represented by Laclau and Mouffe. The question that Gramsci poses is how can the subaltern groups and classes challenge and escape from their subaltern position and constitute themselves historically as an autonomous social and political subject. Antagonism in Modonesi's analysis is "the subjective configuration of the conflict and struggle as lived" and is capable of leading to a challenge for hegemony. Like John Holloway, he sees an emphasis placed on "the negation present in common daily practices of resistance" within the interstices of existing societies. All in all we see, then, an emerging critique of both neo-liberalism and domination by the State over civil society on the one hand, and post-modernist and post-Marxist tendencies on the other.

Keywords

Subaltern classes, Political subjectivization, Antagonism, Political action, Latin America, Populism, Inequalities

Massimo Modonesi's "The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action"

Nicolò Pennucci

1. Introduction

The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action by Massimo Modonesi¹ is the result of a broad project, and represents the arrival point of a research path which began several years ago with the publication of Modonesi's *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy*.² The starting point of the work is a meta-theorization concerning the constitutive elements of a theory of political subjectivation through the concept of the antagonistic principle. Hence, addressing the pivotal political problem of constructing an agent of political subjectivity in the Marxian tradition is the theoretical goal of the book. This goal is realized through a thoroughgoing analysis of central Gramscian categories. Nonetheless, the theoretical effort is solely the starting point of the project developed through this research. Indeed, the second part of the work is devoted to the attempt of operationalizing the theoretical principles examined in the first part into analytical categories through which the author addresses concrete case studies, in particular social movements in the Latin American context. Such a twofold effort is needed as it goes in the direction of emancipating Marxism from being a merely philological exercise, so as to restate its role as a *philosophy of praxis*.

Thus, the first five chapters of the book, which constitute its theoretical part, aim at reconstructing a Marxian theory of political action based on the notion of antagonism. This exercise helps solve some central problems in contemporary Marxist political theory. Indeed, Marxism has traditionally been accused by its critics of two main weaknesses: on the one hand, the determinism which claimed to be inherent in the concept of historical materialism, as derived by the Hegelian theorization of history led by necessity, and on the other hand, the economic reductionism that makes Marxism more appealing in economic than in political theory.

¹ Massimo Modonesi, *The Antagonistic Principle: Marxism and Political Action*, Leiden and Boston: Brill (2018) and Chicago: Haymarket (2019).

² These researches first appeared in Spanish and then in English (Modonesi 2010 and 2014).

On the contrary, by highlighting the process of political subjectivation through the categories of the Gramscian political theory as the way through which an active political agency is created, Modonesi shows how the subalterns can create a political subjectivity to emancipate themselves from capitalist-based domination. Hence, in my view, this book represents an attempt to overcome these two conceptual weaknesses.

In addition, it sheds light on the relationship between structure and agency, which is central in this school of political thought. Furthermore, the second part of the work represents another fundamental contribution to the contemporary debate on Marxism. Indeed, the problem of creating political agency through social movements is central in contemporary sociological analyses of contentious politics, and Marxism as a theoretical framework for understanding political activism is at the centre of a growing debate in the field. In this respect, Modonesi's exercise consists in bringing back a Marxist approach to the study of social movements by giving a new centrality to the concepts of social class and class struggle, through an adaptation of their meaning to the development of contemporary societies. In what follows, I will try to assess whether and to what extent Modonesi's book can reach its goals and, perhaps more importantly, how its highlighting theoretical and empirical analyses may be inserted into the contemporary debate on the political theory of subjectivation and, in particular, on the role that social movements can play in such a process.

2. Assessing the problem of human agency in a Marxian theory of political action

Chapter one consists of a coherent exposition of the foundations of a Marxist theory of political action, as developed through the concept of antagonism. Modonesi here draws readers' attention to the specificity of its theoretical reconstruction as opposed to the Marxist mainstream.³ Notably, from the very beginning, Modonesi states that framing the process of political subjectivation through the lens of the antagonistic principle makes socio-political movements the key political actors to be studied. This is interesting because, as the author clearly states by quoting Alberto Melucci, "there is not such a thing as a Marxist approach to social movements" (p. 9).

³ Modonesi explicitly refers to authors such as E. Neveu (1996) and L. Mathieu (2012).

The reason why this is the case is that first, Marxism was not appealing to the study of collective action because of its intrinsic theoretical limitations and second, when social movement studies were emerging as a driving trend in sociology, orthodox Marxism as a school of political thought had already been removed to the margins of mainstream intellectual efforts. In this respect, Modonesi's attempt aligns with recent attempts that are going in the same direction. Indeed, Donatella Della Porta devoted a pivotal book concerning social movements in times of austerity to the analysis of post-2008 mobilizations in Southern Europe (Della Porta, 2015). Besides the empirical finding in the book, her pivotal normative statement is that, in order to understand the very essence of anti-austerity social movements in Southern Europe – as well as in Latin America – a broader effort to bring capitalism back in social movement studies was required. It is of note that Marxism is perhaps the best approach to look at capitalism in its relationship with collective action (Cox and Gunvald Nilsen, 2014). Furthermore, other social movement scholars state the necessity of a Marxist approach to the study of social movements by critically discussing the limitations of other mainstream schools of thought (cf. Caruso and Cini, 2020). Indeed, Marxism as a *philosophy of praxis* is the right theoretical framework to understand the process of the formation of political subjectivity, which is not historically pre-determined and which shows a political agency beyond economistic approaches. Here again, Modonesi's effort to renovate the interpretation of the process of political subjectivation is not isolated. Indeed, the question of whether there is any place for human agency in the Marxian account of the revolution, or whether it is instead anchored to a deterministic account of social change has been addressed by Allen W. Wood (Wood, 2004). In his book, he advances the thesis that historical materialism, as the detailed analysis of economic and historical conditions, is not in contrast with the statement that individuals are the subjects of social change. In particular, he demonstrates how Marx's teleological account of history cannot be considered *ipso facto* deterministic. Indeed, "Marx's theory holds that history is made by human individuals acting from a wide variety of different conscious motives" (Wood, p. 83). Wood aims at exploring the relationship between agency and structures, as Modonesi also does.

Therefore, the process of the formation of subjectivity that Modonesi describes could be inserted into a wider reflection on the role of collective identity formation. In contemporary political theory, the process of constructing collective political identities is referred to as political identification (Panizza 2017). It may be noted that the process of political identification is said to be performed mainly by political leaders through developed party structures and particularly by populist leaders. Nevertheless, a group of political science and sociology scholars is trying to critically engage with such a statement by claiming that social movements can be the actors performing a process of political identification, and they can consequently be able to go beyond the mainstream assumption that political agency formation requires a political leader (Grattan 2016; Aslandis 2017; Kioupkiolis 2019).

Modonesi's theoretical claims could provide a starting point to apply a Marxist and in particular a Gramscian perspective to the study of social movements performing a process of political identification, thus enriching a niche, which is challenging the mainstream debate concerning agency formation through collective political identities. Indeed, as he states, neither of the two main approaches to social movements – the theory of rational action (in its mobilization of resources and structure of political opportunity versions) and the identity and subjectivity-centred approach – can take into consideration the political consequences attached by a Marxian framework to social movements. Indeed, only an developed Marxist perspective can link together the structural and agency aspects of the dynamics of collective action.

Hence, not only can this framework overcome intrinsic weaknesses in orthodox Marxism, but it also goes beyond several limitations of the other mainstream theories of social movements, which are still unable to solve the same tension between agency and structure.

3. Rethinking the concept of class struggle in twenty-first century society

The concept of antagonism refers to the centrality of class struggle in Marxist analysis. Interestingly, the author states that the notion of class struggle in Marx is fundamental to understanding the sociological concept of agency. Indeed, the kind of agency that

is propagated by Marxism is “a specific form of social action, a political action that is a class action and an antagonistic action” (p. 23).

Nonetheless, the notion of social class is changing. Indeed, “class does not exist as a single socio-political entity there is a field of classes and class struggle in which subjectivities and actors emerge and are shaped” (p. 25). As Colin Barker argues, social movements in this sense are mediations of the class struggle. Modonesi denounces the fact that in contemporary political theory the notion of class has been losing its centrality, and states that this is responsible for the weak theoretical and political proposals of contemporary Marxist forces. However, his solution does not lie in the nostalgia of a Marxian notion of class as based on work relations. Indeed, if one of the goals of a concept of antagonism based on class struggle is that of avoiding cultural reductionism – according to the author, the notion of class is “a powerful antidote against the postmodern culturalism, politicism, and subjectivism that run through the dominant approach of social movements” (p. 24) – it is nonetheless true that contemporary capitalism has cultural shapes. The process of domination that makes some portions of society subaltern is driven by capitalistic logic, but it is propagated through socio-cultural elements rather than socio-economic ones.

In this respect, twenty-first century Marxism should be able to insert these struggles into its political project. This makes the contemporary concept of class broader and perhaps more complex than the one developed by Marx. Late capitalism and neoliberal politics create inequalities that cannot be faced through a merely economic understanding of social class. In this respect, Modonesi’s work can be inserted into the Marxist approach that aims at critically engaging with a new concept of social class in the twenty-first century. His effort to make a renewed concept of social class central for understanding contemporary political agency from below could benefit from a critical dialogue with Guy Standing’s conceptualization of “the precariat” as the subjectivity of the contemporary political antagonist (Standing 2011). If Standing’s approach to agency formation could be put in dialogue with Modonesi’s understanding of social class, Chantal Mouffe on the other hand has long debated on the role of left-wing forces in a political struggle, and has proposed a post-Marxist approach to

political grievances based on the dialectical couple antagonism /agonism (Mouffe 2005). This perspective is under-analysed in Modonesi's book, and I strongly believe that a juxtaposition with certain left-wing proposals trying to insert cultural struggles into a Marxist framework could be beneficial for the advancement of the debate. The innovative notion of class struggle as proposed by Modonesi can solve the theoretical problem of structure and agency, and should be inserted in a broader discussion on the changing meaning of class and class struggle in late capitalism. What could further enhance the analysis is understanding the mutual relationship between work relations and cultural elements of domination in late neoliberalism, as this could be pivotal in order to insert contemporary social movements into the analysis.

In the field of political economy, a Marxian approach to the problem of social classes has been developed in the seminal works by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (cf. Resnick and Wolff, 2002 and 2012; and *id.* 2006 [eds]). Their understanding of the role of social class in Marxism is thought-provoking, yet it is never approached in Modonesi's work. A more critical engagement with a Marxist political economy perspective could benefit Modonesi's theorization in such a central topic in contemporary Marxism.

Analytically speaking, a more comprehensive dialogue with post-structuralist left-wing proposals concerning a concept of agency based on Marxian conflict processes could be beneficial for the understanding of contemporary struggles against capitalist-led inequalities, and Modonesi's perspective could be at the core of this timely debate. Politically speaking, inserting a renewed concept of social class into a debate on contemporary political and social transformations could be central in order to fight both the centrist neoliberalism and the right-wing waves, as two political tendencies in contemporary politics. A left-wing based proposal based on a renewed concept of the social class could be the cornerstone of a left-wing solution to both these problems.

4. *Re-enacting the Gramscian concept of "subaltern classes".*

Chapter two aims at understanding the role of the 'subaltern class' as a central political concept in Marxist political theory. It is of interest that this lemma is derived from Gramsci's *Prisons Notebooks*, which are commonly read as the most elaborated Marxist

political theory text based on the notion of *praxis*. The chapter aims to further elaborate on the notion of political subjectivation in contemporary capitalist societies. The starting point of this chapter is that “it is essential to support and at the same time update a class approach that articulates its social, economic, political and cultural dimension” (p. 32). This exercise goes towards the goal of enriching the notion of class and class struggle, as discussed in chapter one. According to Modonesi, the best way to start such a process is to refer to Gramsci’s notion of subaltern classes. Noteworthy is Modonesi’s attempt at reactivating a Marxist perspective on the study of contentious politics is based on a Gramscian perspective. In this respect, his theoretical effort to further elaborate a Marxian theory of collective action can be considered an attempt at developing in fact a Gramscian theory of collective action. It is to be noted that all the conceptual tools he uses to develop his theoretical approach directly derive from Gramsci’s writings and in particular, his renewal of the concepts of class and class struggle is based on the Gramscian notion of subaltern classes. Primarily, to escape contemporary misinterpretations of the concept, it is useful to go back to the text by finding that “the role and place of the concept in his thinking revolves around the sequence of subalternity, autonomy, hegemony” (p. 33). Consistent with this, a substantive part of the chapter is devoted to an analysis of the concept of subaltern classes in Gramsci’s work by analysing several philological hypotheses on the meaning and significance of the lemma in Gramsci’s work. Philologically speaking, he argues that the Indian School of Subaltern Studies has contributed to add confusion to the term, rather than to its clarification. The result is a subject locked in the concept of subalternity. Returning to the original text allows us to understand that the concept is in fact centred on the subalternity-autonomy-hegemony sequence. This is the cornerstone of a theory-building process based on the assumption that “Gramsci is a theorist not of subalternity, but of the escape from subalternity, of the historical construction of an autonomous social and political subject capable of contending against hegemony” (p. 33). The triadic process of achieving hegemony pass through the development of a sense of autonomy, as the precondition of an active engagement in civil society that leads towards the construction of a hegemonic formation. To put it

in Modonesi's terms: "we can then see the sequence of a hypothetical process of subjectivation: subalternity (hegemonised subaltern classes), autonomy and class consciousness, hegemonic confrontation (counter-hegemony), hegemony (alter-hegemony)".

The interesting conclusion is that "class is thus treated as a relationship and a process; not as statistical data points or political actors pre-constituted on the basis of their material conditions" (p. 41). What is important to highlight is that on the one hand, the notion of class is anti-essentialist and relational, and on the other hand, it is not merely described on the bases of material conditions. Indeed, as Modonesi clearly states: "the class condition, with its material roots in the socioeconomic terrain, and subalternity as a socio-political situation" makes the term subaltern classes the most appropriate to be employed for understanding such a changing process in the concept of class. These two conclusions make Modonesi's research useful not only in the field of political thought but also for contemporary applications in political theory.

Indeed, as far as the former point is concerned, political identification theorists claim that at the very base of identity construction processes, there is an anti-essentialist notion of identity (Melucci 1996). Such a theoretical point could be further evaluated to advance our knowledge of the construction of political subjectivities in contemporary societies. Concerning the latter point, a Gramscian approach to the notion of the class makes solving some theoretical problems possible. In this respect, in Modonesi's view, the problem with Laclau's understanding of class is that it added a non-materialist foundation while denying the material one. Far from rejecting the cultural roots of contemporary neoliberal domination, Modonesi claims that cultural reductionism means rejecting the centrality of the category of social class in itself. Rather than eliminating such a concept, rethinking its heuristic and political potentials through the lenses of the Gramscian notion of subaltern classes is the starting point.

5. Subalternity, Antagonism and Autonomy: assessing Modonesi's theoretical triangulation

Chapter 3 further elaborates on this by analysing the theoretical triangulation between subalternity, antagonism, and autonomy. As observed, these three concepts represent a genuine Gramscian

perspective in the broader attempt at renovating a Marxist theory of political action. The starting point of this chapter is that “the concepts of subalternity, antagonism, and autonomy are a fundamental part of Marxist thought about political action and the subject” (p. 43). In Modonesi’s words, these three concepts are “three faces, areas, or dimensions of the process of politicization and subjective formation” (p. 44). Most of the chapter goes on by reconstructing the intellectual history of these three concepts.

As developed primarily by Antonio Gramsci, “the category of subalternity thus accounts for the subjective condition of subordination in the context of capitalist domination” (p. 44). Unlike subalternity, Modonesi states, “the concept of antagonism has an important place in the works of Marx” (p. 46). Nonetheless, it is thanks to Antonio Negri that the term ‘antagonistic’ refers to the subject configured in conflict so that it is distinct from the simple objective difference it traditionally refers to. Finally, he states that, as far as autonomy is concerned, “in its Marxist use there are two principal definitions: autonomy as class independence – subjective, organizational and ideological – in the context of bourgeois capitalist domination and autonomy as a self-determination, as a model or formation process for an emancipated society” (p. 45). In the specific context of his theorization, Modonesi wants to recover the understanding of autonomy as developed by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort as the two founders of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group.⁴

6. Antagonism as the key category for a Marxian theory of political action

Indeed, chapter 4 deals with the importance of antagonism as a key logical principle of a Marxist theory of political action. The chapter opens by stating the various understandings of antagonism in Marxian and Marxist thought. For the theoretical purposes advanced in his work, in Modonesi’s terms antagonism is defined as “the subjective configuration of the conflict and struggle as lived, to the incorporation of experiences of insubordination characterised by the contestation of domination and by the establishment and exercise of a counter power” (p. 80). In contemporary political

⁴ Castoriadis elaborated his notion of autonomy in his early works and Modonesi does not refer to a particular work, but rather wants to refer to the understanding of the concept of autonomy as developed by the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

theory, four authors can be considered theorists of antagonism. Among them, two are either non-Marxist or post-Marxist (Alberto Melucci and Ernesto Laclau) and two can be considered Marxist (Antonio Negri and John Holloway).

The problem with Melucci's conceptualization is that he "sees antagonistic movements in post-industrial societies as post-political, that is to say as fundamentally cultural" (p. 62). The problem with Laclau is that "in this use antagonism refers to the form of any process of political subjectivation originating discursively in the framework of a conflictual logic of the system. It does not represent a specific form or an experiential dimension of that process that anchors subjectivity in the material existence of the subject or in struggle as practice and as lived experience, as interiorization of the conflict" (p. 63). As clearly stated by Modonesi, Holloway is the author whose conceptualization of antagonism is the closest to his own. He affirms that "Holloway also emphasises the negation present in common daily practices of resistance, where I have instead on an attitude increasingly conscious of rupture that manifests itself in a frank and open conflict led by specific groups or sectors in conspicuous moments of struggle, moments of particularly intense and politicised social conflicts" (p. 64). What is more, antagonism is not only a theoretical concept but also and more importantly, a political strategy tool. In a modern re-interpretation of the Gramscian *praxis*, Modonesi says that "there is no antagonistic practice without a theory of antagonism and vice versa" (p. 67).

As the author declares from the very beginning, the subject of the antagonism is the socio-political movement. In this, there is a fundamental distinction between social movements and socio-political movements "to the degrees and levels of politicization of the processes and dynamics of mobilization, organization and anti-systemic radicalization" (p. 75). Furthermore, at the defining level, there is an equivalence between being antagonistic and being anti-capitalist. This is particularly interesting if we are interested in understanding the validity of social class and class struggle in contemporary social mobilization. If the subject of the antagonism at the collective level is the socio-political movement, at the micro-sociological level the unit of analysis is the militant. The question is the following: "can antagonism insert itself in the existing order, in its state and state-related institutions and subvert them?" (p. 80).

7. *Antagonism vs “passive revolution” two opposite models of political subjectivation*

Chapter 5 concludes the theoretical research by stating the importance of the concept of subalternization as the starting point for a process of political subjectivization through the principle of antagonism. The chapter is devoted to the analysis of “passive revolution” and of close concepts such as Caesarism and transformism. These are three central concepts in Gramscian political theory and scholars have developed various and different interpretations. Nonetheless, Modonesi states that “the utility of fine-tuning the Gramscian conceptual arsenal thus centres not so much on the need to restore its philological clarity, but on sharpening its analytical edge for understanding a series of phenomena and political processes in the past and present” (p. 86). This is particularly important because Modonesi’s purpose is “to sharpen the theoretical tools for identifying and characterising a series of processes and projects of demobilisation that are frequently deployed and implemented from above, in antithesis to the antagonistic and autonomous dynamics that are activated and fed by the processes of political subjectivation” (p. 85). Yet, philological clarity of such an important concept is required in order to apply it to build a theoretical toolkit for understanding contemporary contentious politics. This is the precondition for “outlining a general operative concept that is precise and flexible enough to be applied to historical processes from different periods including the present” (p. 87). In particular, Modonesi engages with Alberto Burgio who applies the adjectives passive and progressive to the lemma Caesarism. Unfortunately, as Modonesi points out, this intuition is not further developed by Burgio.⁵

All this philological reconstruction is needed in order to proceed with his own theorization. Indeed, “passive revolution allows us to appreciate the limits of antagonism and its possible diversion into the labyrinths of subalternity” (p. 85). In Modonesi’s theoretical conceptualization, passive revolution is the opposite of antagonism. Interestingly enough, passive revolution is said to be performed from above, whereas antagonism is a logical principle articulated from below. This is central in the attempt to insert such a theor-

⁵ In his book, Modonesi refers primarily to two of Burgio’s texts: A. Burgio (2007); and A. Burgio (2014).

ization into a broader theoretical approach interested in evaluating the role of social movements in creating collective identity able to maintaining political agency in contemporary societies. Indeed, in Modonesi's terms: "the counterpart to the antagonistic principle is thus constituted by the subaltern inertia that resides in the configuration of political subjectivities, and by the initiatives from above which tend to reproduce and expand that inertia in the interest of perpetuating order and hierarchy through changing strategies, with greater or lesser hegemonic aspiration" (p. 106).

8. *From theory to praxis: building analytical categories to analyse social movements*

As already observed, the second part of the book attempts to operationalize the theoretical findings and to apply them to a number of important concrete phenomena and processes. Chapter six is devoted to this goal. This process is built on the rejection of the vulgar Marxism that is characterized by a positivist orientation typical of the classical Marxist toolkit. The chapter has the role of a disciplinary passage from political theory to political science and sociology. By recalling the theoretical development highlighted in the first five chapters, an operationalization process is put into place so as to transform abstract concepts into analytical categories for the study of contemporary political and social movements in their process of subjectivation.

Chapter seven is devoted to the uses and abuses of the concept of passive revolution in the Latin American context. The added value of his analysis is that of proposing a way of operationalizing such concept to analyse "national popular or populist phenomena in Latin America" (p. 124). This chapter contributes to the growing debate on the uses of Gramscian categories in Latin America, and starts with a review of the use of passive revolution by prominent scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, going through to more recent users and finally assessing the contemporary state of the debate. In general, as Modonesi clearly states: "the recurrence and persistence of dynamics of capitalist modernization and politics that are activated and directed from above, through a state that predominates over civil society, lends itself to a Gramscian interpretation" (p. 149). Modonesi's wish is that a more precise clarification of the concept would allow the coherent use of the

concept itself in the analysis of contemporary Latin American politics. In this respect, a growing corpus of analysis of Gramscian thought is present in Latin America, and more structured dialogue among Gramscian scholars in the region (and beyond) could benefit by realizing Modonesi's wish.

Chapter 8 again concentrates on Latin America with a particular focus on contemporary Latin American politics. In particular, it analyses how the thesis of the "end of the progressive cycle" (p. 164) in the region could be proved wrong. Notably, chapter 9, written with Maristella Svampa, talks about the future of progressivism in Latin America, by assessing the possibility of post-progressivism and emancipatory horizons. It tries to assess whether the political theorization put forward in the first part of the book can actually be operationalized to understand the role of progressive social movements fighting against the neoliberal turn in Latin America.

9. Conclusion: Developing a Gramscian theoretical framework for the study of contemporary contentious politics

Overall, the book opens up an inspiring path to use a Gramscian theoretical framework in the study of contemporary social movements. Although the empirical focus of the book is focused on the Latin American case, the world is facing several contentious episodes all over the world, with the US and Europe registering a dramatic escalation in non-conventional political participation.

I am therefore confident that this book could be used to examine the development of social movements that also goes beyond the Latin American case. Bringing back the role of social class and social struggle in the process of constructing an agent-subject is the main theoretical point of the book. As I have already observed, the perspective of giving an innovative meaning to the term social class is central to comprehending the struggle against tardo-neoliberal inequalities in contemporary societies.

The theoretical findings of this book should be placed in a constructed dialogue with social movement scholars engaged in the effort of bringing back capitalism to the core of the field as well as with political theorists who try to demonstrate that the process of constructing a political agency through collective political identity is not merely in the hands of right-wing populist forces. This book promises to be central as a theoretical and political tool to address

the role of progressive social movements in constructing political agency through the formation of political subjectivities, and to assess their role in fighting the late neoliberal political order.

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